

Digitally-delivered offerings improve accessibility of care

● *Platforms like WhatsApp have allowed service providers the opportunity to provide more affordable and accessible services, writes Lynette Dicey*

In years to come Covid-19 will be remembered not only for its losses, but also for the gains it precipitated – many of which are steeped in technology and have resulted in considerable wins for patient care and private health care.

"The decision of the Health Professions Council of South Africa to allow phone or video consultations with doctors and other practitioners during the Covid-19 crisis resulted in a flurry of online health care consultations, which has served the upper end of the South African health care market particularly well," says Patrick Lubbe, CEO of the National HealthCare Group, a fully accredited health care administrator and managed care organisation.

"Unfortunately, with the cost of telecommunications being prohibitively high in our country, many South Africans are still left out in the cold. This is where more affordable communications platforms,



Patrick Lubbe ... way to connect.

such as WhatsApp, which is used by the majority of internet users, can fulfil the desperate need for connectivity."

Popular platforms like WhatsApp have allowed health care service providers the opportunity to provide more affordable and accessible services, he says, explaining that National HealthCare Group has been leveraging mobile communication and chat commerce technology so that patients can have virtual or

face-to-face consultations with a GP through a product called MediClub ConnectTM.

"This primary health care offering differentiates itself through delivering health care using a cellphone and a series of WhatsApp prompts to pinpoint potential health care issues. The low-cost service provides members with online interactive access to doctors and nurses on WhatsApp, physical consultations with doctors on referral, and all prescribed medication along with other key services for a maximum of R95 per employee a month. It gives members an effective way to connect with a health professional from home," says Lubbe.

Pointing out that affordability is a huge factor for business, Lubbe says it is worth noting that for less than the daily minimum wage, workers can now have access to private health care for an entire month. "It makes economic sense that employees at all levels of an organisation should have access

to quality primary health care. It is also creating opportunities for general practitioners joining our growing network by opening-up an untapped market."

The past year has delivered some tough learnings for many local companies, not least of which was the need for safe, quality primary health care services. Practical and user-friendly technology applications which provide the benefits of private medical services to the low-cost segment of the market make sense in this environment, says Lubbe.

The uptake of a tech-savvy yet simple solution was almost instantaneous as it was fulfilling a considerable need for more accessible health care, while empowering individuals to monitor their health closely. The virtual medical consultation service, which was launched at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2020, went on to reduce the cost of primary health care cover beyond all expectations for corporate clients and their employees.